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‘Nothing truly wild is unclean’: Muir, misanthropy and the aesthetics of dirt

John Muir once wrote that nothing truly wild is unclean. In this paper, I consider how Muir-esque notions of nature’s cleanliness have been taken up by those who regard urban environments as wild places that have, over the centuries, become increasingly polluted by human beings and their works. It is clear that such misanthropic views can be criticised on moral grounds; I contend that they deserve to be criticised on aesthetic grounds too. Adapting the work of Yuriko Saito, I argue that they indicate a certain kind of aesthetic failure – a failure to appreciate the human world on its own terms.

One aspect of *My First Summer in the Sierra* strikes a sour note: Muir’s expressions of revulsion towards the Ahwahneechee people of Yosemite.¹ At one point near the beginning of his journey he recoils from an ‘old Indian woman’ clad in calico rags, ‘far from clean’;² later on, he expresses his disgust at a ‘band of Indians’, their faces encrusted with dirt.³ ‘The worst thing about them,’ he writes, ‘is their uncleanness’.⁴ Yet the dirtiness of the Ahwahneechee reflects a more general truth. ‘[M]ankind alone is dirty’, he claims, while ‘Deer, like all wild animals, are as clean as plants’.⁵ ‘Nothing truly wild is unclean’.⁶

¹ Though, in fairness, it should be noted that in later life Muir drastically revised his views of them. See further, Robert Macfarlane’s introduction to *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2007), pp. xix-xx.

² Ibid., p. 41.

³ Ibid., pp. 159-60.

⁴ Ibid., p. 165.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 41, 102.

⁶ Ibid., p. 165.

Two things may be noted about these statements. The first is that their theme – that of dirt and dirtiness – has been largely neglected by environmental philosophers, which is surprising given the clear connections, known to parents of small children, between dirt and the natural world. The second noteworthy feature of Muir’s reflections on dirt and cleanliness is his curious contention: that humankind is dirty and wild nature clean.

On the face of it, that claim seems plainly false. It is true that Yosemite, with its pine forests and clear mountain air, has a certain freshness to it (Muir calls it ‘one of the cleanest landscapes in the world’).⁷ But the same cannot be said of all of wild nature. After all, wild places and their inhabitants contain a great deal of soil, sand and dust, and while the coats of Yosemite’s deer might be shiny and clean, the hippos of the Okavango delta are of course wild animals too.

There is, however, a sense in which Muir’s claim must be true. For although ‘dirt’ has many meanings, one plausible suggestion is that it denotes a bit of wild nature that has found its way into the human world.⁸ In this sense, dirt is the mark on the hallway carpet, the gunk under one’s fingernail, the matter encrusted on the knee of one’s jeans. It is soil or earth that is out of place. What counts as ‘out of place’ will depend on one’s context. In one culture a certain lump of matter will qualify as soil (or even a certain kind of soil); in another it will count as dirt. Be that as it may, if dirt is conceived as wild

⁷ Ibid., p. 105.

⁸ Cf. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 44. See also, Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Chapter 4. For the purposes of this paper, the human world may be taken to denote the built environment, the non-living part of the world that is the intended product of human agency.

nature that is out of place, then it follows that wild nature itself cannot be dirty, for it is, so to speak, the proper home of what, when it finds its way into the human world, we call dirt.

To be sure, not everyone shares this view. I once knew a woman – call her L – who, despite being a compassionate and caring person, thought that wild nature was a nasty and (as she put it) ‘dirty’ place. Set aside speculations about why L thought this. For present purposes, it will suffice to note that L was only able to see wild nature as dirty because she saw it, not in contrast to the human world, but as part of it. For her, woods and wetlands were not places where dirt had its proper home. She judged them according to the standards appropriate to human places, such as hallways and living rooms. And she found them lacking – disturbingly dirty. In this respect, L’s response to nature resembled that of Vivian in Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Decay of Lying’, who is unimpressed when she takes up a friend’s invitation to view a glorious sunset. The view, she claims, is ‘simply a very second-rate Turner, a Turner of a bad period, with all the painter’s worst faults exaggerated and over-emphasised.’⁹ L’s view may also be compared with that of the ‘city-dweller’ imagined by Erazim Kohák, who, on finding himself in a wood, judges that it ‘grows “wild” as a neglected garden, devoid of order and waiting to have one imposed upon it’.¹⁰ Like both Wilde’s Vivian and Kohák’s urbanite, L judged wild nature according to aesthetic standards that are only applicable to human artefacts. In Yuriko Saito’s phrase, she was guilty of a certain kind of aesthetic and moral

⁹ See Oscar Wilde, ‘The Decay of Lying’, in Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism & Selected Critical Prose* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 163-92, at p. 185.

¹⁰ *The Embers and the Stars: a philosophical inquiry into the moral sense of nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 73.

failure: a failure to regard wild nature ‘as having its own reality apart from our presence’.
L failed to ‘appreciate nature on its own terms’.¹¹

Φ

Muir wrote to his wife that ‘Only by going alone in silence, without baggage, can one truly get into the heart of the wilderness.’¹² But as he well knew, it is not just things, the material paraphernalia of modern life, that must be set aside. To a certain extent, one must also bracket one’s preoccupations. And a preoccupation with dirtiness is one item of baggage that must be left behind if one is to follow Saito’s advice and appreciate wild nature on its own terms. If one is to achieve the clarity of aesthetic and moral vision to which she refers, then one must relinquish all tendencies to regard wild nature as dirty. It is of course true that wild places are full of soil and earth, and to some these things will seem ‘abject’, in Julia Kristeva’s sense of the term.¹³ But to aesthetically and morally virtuous persons none of these substances will seem to be out of place, and so none of them will count as dirt.

¹¹ Yuriko Saito, ‘Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms’, in A. Carlson and A. Berleant (eds.) *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (Toronto: Broadview, 2004), pp. 141-155, pp. 151, 145. Cf. Iris Murdoch: ‘Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature’ (*The Sovereignty of Good* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 40).

¹² Terry Gifford (ed.) (1996) *John Muir: His life and letters and other writings* (Macclesfield: Bâton Wicks), p.301.

¹³ See further, Bert Olivier, ‘Nature as “Abject”, Critical Psychology, and “Revolt”: The Pertinence of Kristeva’, *South African Journal of Psychology* 37 (3) (2007): pp. 443-69.

However, as we saw, Muir did not just maintain that wild nature is free from dirt. He claimed that it is *clean*. What are we to make of this judgement?

As Mary Douglas has shown, cleanliness implies order.¹⁴ By the same token, dirt ‘offends against order’; it is what ‘must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained.’¹⁵ The most familiar kind of pattern here is that of the household. This is the order that is disturbed by the mud on the living room carpet, the black gunk in the corner of the window frame. Yet Douglas has also revealed how concerns with purity and cleanliness can presuppose other sorts of order, as when people of low social status are branded as unclean.¹⁶

Muir, for his part, takes wild nature to epitomise order. In his view, even the lowliest clod of earth plays its part in nature’s great economy: ‘No Sierra landscape that I have ever seen holds anything truly dead or dull, or any trace of what in manufactories is called rubbish or waste; everything is perfectly clean and pure and full of divine lessons’.¹⁷ To be sure, Muir admits, there

¹⁴ ‘[I]deas of purity and impurity...’ reflect an ‘impulse to impose order’ (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 6).

¹⁵ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pp. 2, 50.

¹⁶ See her discussion of Hindu conceptions of spiritual pollution in *Purity and Danger*, Chapter 7.

¹⁷ Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, p. 114. Two things may be noted about this quotation. It is significant, first, that Muir does not extend this inclusive attitude to Yosemite’s longer-term inhabitants. On the contrary, they have ‘no right place in the landscape’ (quoted in Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 109; cf. Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, p. 41). The second point that may be noted is the implied connection between cleanliness and holiness. As Douglas has shown, holiness is typically construed as a kind of order – one that can be disrupted by dirty thoughts and other polluting influences

seems to be enormous wastage. And yet when we look into any of [nature's] operations that lie within reach of our minds, we learn that no particle of her material is wasted or worn out. It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty to yet higher beauty; and we soon cease to lament waste and death, and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable, unspendable wealth of the universe, and faithfully watch and wait the reappearance of everything that melts and fades and dies about us, feeling sure that its next appearance will be better and more beautiful than the last.¹⁸

For Muir, then, wild nature is clean in the sense that nothing in it is out of place. Assume, for the sake of argument, that he is right. By what can that order be disrupted?

There are several candidates. Most obviously, the order of wild nature can be disrupted by the presence of certain anthropogenic entities, particularly those, like dioxins, which tend to resist biodegradation. If a place is to qualify as wild, in Muir's sense, then it must for the most part be free of such entities.

Yet some will go further in contending that if a place is to qualify as wild and hence as clean, then it must be free of human beings themselves, and not just their products. In some instances, this conclusion will be supported by an appeal to pragmatic considerations. It will be argued that keeping a place free of non-biodegradable

(see, e.g., *Purity and Danger*, p.67). Likewise, Muir does not simply maintain that wild landscapes are clean: their features, he suggests, 'radiate spiritual beauty, divine thought' (Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, p. 185).

¹⁸ Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, p. 177.

contaminants and the like sometimes requires one to exclude the human beings who drop them as litter or release them from sewage pipes.¹⁹ In other cases, however, it might be thought that the purity of wild nature is sullied, not just by the products of human beings, but by the mere presence of men, women and children. Furthermore, if wildness is valued, then certain practical measures may, for this very reason, be deemed necessary. It might be held that certain apparently wild places should be protected from the polluting influence of human beings. It might even be maintained that certain places should be restored to their wild states by removing the human beings who inhabit them. Either way, the motivation will be to promote wildness by excluding or removing people. The motivation, as Cecilia Herles puts it, will be to protect ‘the earth from the polluting forces of humanity that can destroy the natural purity of the wild.’²⁰

With these notions we are a far cry from laudable efforts to keep wild places free of anthropogenic pollutants such as dioxins and detergents. For just as patriotism can be twisted into xenophobia, so, as many have noted, a love of wild nature can transform itself into a desire to exclude certain undesirable humans from what are perceived to be

¹⁹ Consider the contrast Thoreau makes between the ‘clean’ ducks that live on Flint’s Pond with the ‘unclean’ Farmer Flint who has ‘ruthlessly laid bare’ the pond’s shores and ‘exhausted’ the surrounding land. Thoreau clearly believes that men like Flint should be kept out of wild nature, not simply because they are human beings – in fact, Thoreau greatly admires some of those who live and work in the area – but because they have no feel for such places and are ever ready to exploit them in order to make an easy buck. See *Walden*, edited by S. Fender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). The discussion of Flint is at pp. 176-80; for Thoreau’s favourable impressions of the local ‘wild men’, see p. 253.

²⁰ Cecilia Herles, ‘Muddying the Waters Does Not Have to Entail Erosion: Ecological Feminist Concerns with Purity’, *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 5 (2) (2000): 109-23, at p. 114.

wholly wild places. Thus, whether or not Muir himself was misanthropic (and I take no stand on that question), it was partly a Muir-inspired love of pristine nature that motivated efforts to hound the local peoples from their ancestral lands in Yellowstone, Yosemite and Glacier National Parks.²¹ The truth of the matter was that the lush meadow floor of Yosemite Valley, which to Muir and others had seemed a vision of Eden, was the product of the Ahwahneechee practice of burning the brush in order to create space for grazing.²²

The motivation for excluding the Ahwahneechee was partly racist. Yosemite was thought to have been contaminated, not simply by human beings, but by human beings of a certain ethnicity. In other instances, however, the prejudice at work in the wish to purge nature of human beings is misanthropic. Consider the views of the self-confessed ‘anti-humanist’ Robinson Jeffers. In his poem ‘Love-Children’, he expresses his relief that the planet will go on ‘perfectly whole and content, after mankind is / scummed from the kettle.’²³ Elsewhere, he writes that the world will think ‘It was only a moment’s accident / The race that plagued us’, before resuming ‘the old lonely immortal / Splendor’.²⁴

²¹ See further, Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*.

²² Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1995), p. 186. Not all of those who found the Ahwahneechee repellently dirty thought their presence detracted from the aesthetic qualities of apparently natural landscapes. Thus while the artist and writer Constance Fletcher Gordon Cumming found Yosemite Indian encampments to be ‘filthy’ and uninviting, she nonetheless placed them in the foreground of some of her paintings, in order to enhance the apparent ‘naturalness’ of the scene depicted. Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, p. 106.

²³ From ‘Love-Children’, in Tim Hunt (ed.), *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 146.

²⁴ From ‘The Broken Balance’, Hunt, *The Selected Poetry*, p. 163.

Indeed he sometimes goes further, maintaining that nature can be contaminated, not merely by the presence of human beings, but simply by their gaze: ‘Whatever we do to a landscape – even to look – damages it’.²⁵ Sullies it, he might have said. Jeffers looks forward to a time when all our towns and cities, highways and bridges, dams and parking lots will have been reclaimed by the sea, forests and desert; when all our works will have been re-sanctified and cleansed, returned to what he thought of as the cosmic order of nature.²⁶

Φ

In many cases, then, efforts to protect natural places from the polluting influences of (certain) humans are harmless. They are in fact praiseworthy when motivated by a desire to protect nature from the damaging incursions of its would-be exploiters. In other cases, however, concerns with nature’s purity and the polluting influences of human beings reflect pernicious forms of prejudice, such as racism and misanthropy. So although nature is not dirty, there are sometimes reasons to be suspicious of claims that it is (and ought to be) clean, especially when this cleanliness is thought to consist in the absence of human beings, or certain sorts of human beings.

²⁵ From ‘An Extinct Vertebrate’, in Tim Hunt (ed.), *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), p. 438. Perhaps Jeffers was motivated to write this by the same thought that gripped Sartre: the notion that ‘What is seen is possessed; to see is to *deflower*.’ *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 578.

²⁶ See Frederic I. Carpenter, *Robinson Jeffers* (New York: Twayne, 1962), p.115.

In one sense, those who follow Jeffers in regarding human beings as contaminants are poles apart from those, like L, who recoil from the ‘dirtiness’ of wild nature. Yet, in fact, their standpoints share some striking similarities. On the one hand, both the anthropocentrist and the misanthropist are motivated by a longing for purity and cleanliness. On the other – and more interestingly - both human-centred and misanthropic thinkers believe that an exceptionally wide range of places are ‘dirty’. For anthropocentrists such as L it is not just human places, like hallways and living rooms, that can be dirty; wild nature is dirty too. For misanthropists, it is not just wild places such as Yosemite that have become polluted by the presence of human visitors; non-wild places, even cities, have also become polluted. In the eyes of the misanthropist, even Times Square, downtown Tokyo and Piccadilly Circus are at root wild places that have been contaminated by human beings. That is why such individuals can look at these kinds of places and look forward to a time when they have been reclaimed and cleansed by ivy and grass.

It is clear that the misanthropic view of humans as pollutants can be criticised on moral grounds, for it violates the fundamental moral principle that persons – and I would add, all humans - be treated with respect.²⁷ Yet it can be criticised on aesthetic grounds

²⁷ Recall Jeffers’ reference to humans being ‘scummed from the kettle’. Such claims suggest that humans are not being regarded as persons, but merely as some kind of undifferentiated stuff. Interestingly, Douglas suggests that to brand something as dirt is to erase its identity: ‘In the course of imposing any order... the attitude to rejected bits and pieces goes through two stages. First they are recognisably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away. At this stage they have some identity... This is the stage at which they are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence. But a long process of pulverizing,

too. If Saito is correct, then, as we saw, those people who regard wild nature as distastefully dirty have failed to appreciate wild nature on its own terms. They have failed to regard it as having ‘its own reality apart from our presence’.²⁸ And – again, assuming that Saito is correct – this indicates a kind of aesthetic failure. Yet the misanthropist is guilty of a similar kind of shortcoming. For just as anthropocentrists judge wild nature according to standards only appropriate to artefacts, so misanthropists judge the human world according to standards only appropriate to wild nature. Just as an anthropocentrist might regard wild nature as, say, a hallway that has become clogged with dirt or (more plausibly) a garden that has grown out of control, so a misanthropist might regard Times Square as a wild place that has become contaminated by human beings and their works.²⁹ The one fails to appreciate nature on its own terms; the other fails to appreciate the human world on its own terms. Yet both have failed to exercise that fine quality of attention which, if Saito is correct, lies at the heart of moral and aesthetic excellence.

dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognised as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered into the mass of common rubbish... So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous.’ (*Purity and Danger*, pp. 197-8)

²⁸ Saito, ‘Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms’, p. 151.

²⁹ For a fascinating account of what Manhattan Island might have been like circa 1609, see the Wildlife Conservation Society’s Mannahatta Project (<http://www.wcs.org/news-and-features-main/well-take-mannahatta.aspx> [accessed 5 March 2013]).